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Life War Politics

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FLOYD REBELLION

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ONE

We live *after* the George Floyd rebellion. Not merely in the midst of a global pandemic, not merely in the midst of the breakdown of the American political system, not merely in the midst of a questioned election, not simply in the time of what many would call the “Black Lives Matter” movement, but *after* the 2020 summer rebellion.

The rebellion of this summer manifested as a response—and not, importantly, as a reaction—to the murder of George Floyd. From there, it took on the contours of roughly five modes. First, the immediate reaction to the death of George Floyd Jr. in the final days of May, culminating in widespread unrest and the burning of the 3rd Precinct by thousands of protesters. Second, nearly a week of massive looting of shopping districts and rioting in city and town centers in hundreds of municipalities across the country, especially at the beginning of June. In this phase, millions of people seized the time and or space necessary to freely construct a proportionate response to Floyd’s death. In the third mode, beginning with the killing of Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta, local insurrections responded to police killings in Rochester, Kenosha, Lafayette, Louisville and elsewhere. These forms did not renegotiate power across entire cities, but they did allow Black people

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and other people of conscience to retain control over political and ethical priorities within their context, keeping police and city governments alike on the retreat. Contemporaneously, but nevertheless in an additional, fourth mode, protesters began to construct “autonomous zones” in city-centers and to wage iconoclastic attacks on Confederate and Colonial monuments. This allowed protesters to broaden the scope of the movement after police were indicted in Minneapolis, and to retain the tactical initiative even as the crowds diminished in size. In the fifth mode, starting around July 4th, seemingly focused crowds of prepared and experienced fighters carry out targeted attacks, or willfully engage police. This coincided with ritualized and dramatic street battles between protesters and police in Richmond, Seattle, and—most famously—Portland. Among the attacks were the burning of the construction site of the juvenile detention center in Seattle, attacks on various police and law enforcement headquarters in Atlanta, the torching of courthouses in Oakland, and Colorado. This mode shares commonalities with the previous modes, but represented the twilight of spatial or tactical innovations within the movement. After the end of July, we argue, we see the undeniable waning of mass activity affiliated with the George Floyd Rebellion. At the same time, upheaval has by no means ceased entirely. Occasional flare-ups and explosions, typical of the third mode of the rebellion, are still taking place, as we saw in Philadelphia in the week before the election, following the killing of Walter Wallace.

Idris has said, “a leaderless and multi-racial rebellion did in fact take place.” Yes. We elaborate: That the George Floyd Rebellion took place means that an antagonistic autonomist movement has exposed the biopolitical project of Western civilization by attacking it.

Nevertheless, if we can still speak of a “revolutionary” task today, it is to nourish and cultivate the forms, practices, infrastructures, and tendencies that have potentiated rebellion—from mutual aid networks to neighborhood solidarities and car shows—and to encourage, strengthen, and embolden whatever has emerged in the wake of those summer months, to protect it from repression, confusion, or erasure. These oases must resolve themselves to grapple in open conflict from time to time, and with methods and resources which are in no way presupposed, but which are developed through tenuous determination.

rebellion mobilized lifestyles that were already to some extent present. Mutual aid networks set up to distribute food to those lacking in the pandemic became means of collecting and distributing supplies for frontliners. In some places, existing local bail funds grew ten times over to support those arrested in the rebellion. Neighborhood solidarities became means of organizing for safety, or for attack. Roommates became frontliner crews, moms and dads became fighting forces in their own right. Side shows, which were in many ways tactical incubators for proletarian youth across the country, also demonstrated the absolute breakdown of police control within reclaimed urban spaces. Autonomous spaces, independent art galleries, local hubs of all kinds, became gathering sites for meetings and informal organization. Organized crime, too, had its role to play. In this sense, the old demarcation between organization and spontaneity falls away—or is at least manifestly complicated. A plane of organization—of nascent, loose, near-organic organization that was in many cases apolitical, organization at the level of daily life—is thus revealed beneath and beyond the parties, organizations, or non-profits traditionally recognized as political actors. The primacy of revolt in relation to that which captures it follows neatly from here. It is in this sense that we characterize the rebellion not as a *reaction* to George Floyd’s murder, but as a response: an expression of a myriad of sensible, vital forces capable of changing to meet the demands of its situation.

On this same plane, we now exist in a world populated by beings borne in the rebellion—crews of frontliners, massive solidarity funds, DIY and autonomous spaces whose political character has been elaborated and revealed. What happens to these molecular becomings now?

The question of revolution may be one of a bygone era.

TWO

Within struggles, the terrain and terms, the sides and stakes, of the antagonism are themselves also under constant contestation. The appraisal of forces, the calibration of risks, the clash of infantry: all of this could be understood, not generically as the factors of a battle, but as the anatomy of a specific conception of warfare. As the Life-War continuum is consciously blurred by modern industrial states, and the mobilization of public affects, anxieties, and prejudices are increasingly mobilized into a bipartisan “culture war,” emancipatory actors must reflect on the terms of the terms, not to struggle against the opposing camps or enemies, but the terrain of unfolding hostilities itself.

Western governance maintains public order by regulating, steering, facilitating, abandoning, killing, and controlling biological existence within our species and the life forms on which our species depends. What is permitted and what is possible are constantly paired, as unregulated life is consistently associated with scarcity, uncertainty, suffering, and Blackness. But from both the perspective of governance and that of the governed, the biopolitical task has been upset. As David Wallace Wells and other climate analysts have shown, we have exited the so-called “Human Climate Niche.” The existence of our species on this planet, for roughly 350,000 years, has taken place within a specific set of relatively delicate conditions that no longer seem to have a reliable future. With carbon parts per million exceeding 400, ocean acidification wiping out marine life, biodiversity collapse, and a myriad of sophisticated ecological problems undermining the basis for complex terrestrial existence, the possibility of fulfilling the mandate of biopolitical governance—to administer, regulate, and govern life—is itself called into question. At present, around

1,000 Americans per day are dying of coronavirus, with no plans in place to contain the “uncontrolled spread” of the disease across the territory. This summer, over 500,000 Oregonians were displaced from catastrophic wildfires that spread from California to Washington State. It is thus of little surprise that contemporary revolts adopt positions not simply regarding widespread inequalities or corruption, but against the terms of life itself, of what lives matter, of what is worth dying for.

In our era, life is both the terrain and object of an ongoing conflict. But what type of conflict is this? Contemporary governance tends to transform all antagonisms, latent or sudden, into a contest of a basic shape: that between constituted groups with articulable or coherent interests and normative figures to represent those groups. And from a certain perspective, much of the events we know now as the George Floyd Rebellion can be understood in precisely these terms. For instance, after the initial days of revolt in Minneapolis, the “Defund the Police” program gained purchase within the media as the ostensible demand of the broader rebellion. Specialized groups constituted themselves within the movement: armed security teams guarded autonomous zones; organized right wing and white supremacist militias “deployed” throughout the Pacific Northwest; bands of armed antifascists confronted libertarian militias in Kenosha, Seattle, and Portland. The chaotic flux of the revolt is reframed, as much as it can be, as a sectarian battle between “BLM/ANTIFA members,” and a right wing specter variously described as Boogaloo Boys, neo-Nazis, Proud Boys, or simply MAGA extremists. Vast reservoirs of feeling and energy are reimaged as intentional and organizational interiorities. This style of conflict emerges when the initiative of rebellious actors is not powerful enough to break the time or space of the ruling order, and must militate within

a specific faction of society uniquely positioned to liberate the world from its woes, we see instead the steady accumulation of small realities. Breaks and fragments tear away from an increasingly empty and meaningless center.

It is in this context that we believe we share two significant notions with our co-panelists—and we hope they will correct us if not! The first is the affirmation of an “ante-politics,” to use the term chosen by the organizers of our panel. (Moten & Harney have expressed an adjacent notion in their conception of the “surround,” a scene of activity and livelihood beyond the enclosure of the fort and the common of traditional politics. Agamben has insisted upon the necessity of thinking a politicized “zoe.”) Here, we understand a politicized life independent of its entry into or qualification by politics in its institutionalized form. What is significant here is twofold. First, it avoids postulating a political-ontological task—a “becoming-human” or “becoming-political” that enables, expresses, and reproduces the exclusive-inclusion that facilitates the white supremacy of the state. Second, it harbors the possibility of shifting the site of politics away from the terrain of the contemporary governmental apparatus onto the terrain of everyday life.

Related is the second idea we believe we share with our co-panelists: the affirmation of the primacy of revolt in relation to that which governs or captures it. As you know, Stefano Harney has recently stated, “insurgency is primary, rebellion comes first. We don’t rebel against the police because there’s police. The police come after us if we show ourselves as that primary antagonism.”

How can we understand these two points—ante-politics and the primacy of revolt—in terms of the summer rebellion? As concerns something like an ante-politics, we understand that the

THREE

As the basic assumptions of the Western biopolitical project are called into question from every side, the line demarcating periods of social peace from upheaval has begun to blur. Indeed, this is the peculiar conclusion required by any attentive consideration of the geographically and temporally disparate events colloquially gathered under the banner of “Black Lives Matter.” The mass phenomenon we have called the “George Floyd Rebellion” has already been subsumed under this banner in mainstream media. While a certain perspective accurately recognizes the continuity of challenges to the subordination and death of Black people in this country from 2014 to 2020, and another might—equally accurately—point to the continuity between the Black struggles of our decade and those of the 60s and 70s, we must also recognize that we live in a decade in which a variety of conflicts proliferate. Over the past several years, and even more so in 2020, we have seen housing struggles, struggles against immigrant detention, struggles over the border, labor strikes, teachers’ movements, students’ movements, prison uprisings, and even times of unrest whose political significance is difficult to ascertain, such as the unusually destructive riots in L.A. for the Lakers, and then for the Dodgers, two weeks ago.

In our context, traditional conceptual apparatuses of revolt or revolution founder. Contemporary revolts do not represent a form of communication, do not coalesce around coherent identities to inform a new political subject, and they do not inaugurate a new universal experience of reality to be aggressively subordinated to advanced forms of algorithmic segregation. Where many may imagine an increasingly self-aware and intelligent consciousness, a consciousness represented by

given configurations of power.

And yet, a struggle over the terms of a conflict is hidden inside of every confrontation, however concealed it may be. Beyond the clash of opposing forces, there is also a struggle between concepts of victory and defeat, and over the nature of the hostility itself. Does the form of antagonism produce intractable polarizations, such that the resolution can only result in the absolute elimination of one or both parties? Does it tend to reconfigure the structure of the society around it, or is it a conflict alongside which spectators can live? Is the battle a paradigmatic fight between ethical opposites, the resolution of which will fundamentally alter life as we know it? If one side loses, does the other side win? Does the fighting allow for various degrees of specialization, force, violence, and creativity? Or does it tend to become more specialized, more violent, and less creative as it develops?

The initial rebellion in Minneapolis, specifically as it culminated in the burning of the 3rd precinct, was an example of the kind of struggle we want to see, not simply because of the impressive and unthinkable facts on the ground, but because of what was made possible by the arrangement of forces in the first place. Anyone who was present for those final days of May can tell you that what took place on those afternoons and evenings was a genuine youth revolt, with widespread participation also among adults and children. Having seized the free and joyous initiative over the time and space of battle, the rebels chose to make everything a festival. Skateboarders were jumping over burning piles of trash, children were pushing carts of toys and fruit juices out of stores with their parents, young lovers embraced in their oversized hoodies, gazing into each others eyes as the smoking inferno behind them—the 3rd Precinct—cast everything in a dark orange glow. The police encountered hostile enemy forces,

engaged in bitter and relentless urban guerrilla operations. The former imagined coordinated and intelligent acts of sophisticated and, possibly, funded commandos. In fact, the police and the rebels were not on the same block, not in the same neighborhoods, not in the same city; they weren't even in the same reality. With their preferred theater of operations—the modern metropole—reduced to a smoldering playground, and the psychological medium of their rule—consensus reality—absolutely vacated, the police wandered around the city as a desperate group of people with sticks and tear gas, and nothing more. This is precisely the kind of conflict we believe that millions of people were able to initiate for about a week: asymmetrical subversive activity in which unspecialized, mostly unarmed, groups composed of different ethnicities, religious affiliations, sexualities, and ages could freely utilize time, space, and infrastructure according to both the unregulated initiative of their desires and the capacities of the people around them.

Throughout the rebellion, forms of low-intensity mass combat emerged, as a decentralized force of “frontliners,” including “mom-blocks” and “dad-blocks,” mobilized from within their subjective spheres in a format that simultaneously subverted and challenged the normative coherence which those spheres typically rely upon. While these forms did not allow rebellious social forces to completely regain the initiative, or to reimagine the theater of operations, nor to establish the kind of martial and phenomenological asymmetry reminiscent of the period of late May or early June, they did facilitate experiments in partial rearrangements of force, allowing for diverse elements to mix and, at the very least, retain autonomous initiative vis a vis one another.

But what has become of this “conflict over conflict,” now that the actions of the summer seem to be waning? It now appears as

a dispute over the boundaries of the political itself. In the days leading up to the election, for instance, a truck affiliated with a Trump caravan (that included a local elected official) fired on “Black Lives Matter” protesters gathered at the defaced Robert E. Lee monument in Richmond, Virginia. At the polls, election defenders were called upon by both parties, giving the sense that the democratic institution itself is at risk. Actions undertaken in the course of the rebellion—in particular looting, arson, and the strange category of “inciting a riot”—are being persecuted not as politicized gestures, but as criminal activity, often described as acts of “opportunism” that ran parallel to the otherwise legitimate protests. The Republican Party has still not ceased to question the results of the recent election, hoping to stoke their base into a partisan contest against the legitimacy of the electoral process itself. Demonstrations during the week of the election—in Portland, in Minneapolis, in NYC—were repressed heavily by police, as drag racers and “side show” or “takeover” participants (a youth subculture with extensive participation in the protests this summer) were simultaneously criminalized across the country.

That is all to say that the domain of legitimate politics is once again under partial police control. Both major wings of the state are engaged in unified, though apparently opposed, attacks on the free initiative of human beings. By fighting one another in seemingly escalated conflict, the two major parties hope to reconstitute one another as the paradigmatic antagonism of the present. They are doing everything they can to make us care, to make us get involved, to bring us into the process, to force us to pick one of their miserable, joyless sides.